Gunpowder Tea: Rolled Green Tea, Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Gunpowder production, in summary:** Gunpowder is Chinese green rolled into pellets, pearl tea in Chinese, that unfurl into a bold, brisk cup. How and where it is made, and how to brew it.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in April 2026.

Gunpowder is the rolled pellet Chinese green tea that has been a workhorse of the global tea trade for over a thousand years. Stronger, more substantial, more storage stable than typical loose leaf green. The Western "gunpowder" name describes the leaf appearance; the Chinese name "zh? chá" (??, "pearl tea") is more poetic. Both describe the same tightly rolled green tea pellets that unfurl beautifully when brewed.

The name across languages

- **English: Gunpowder.** 17th century English merchants thought the rolled pellets looked like gunpowder grains.
- **Chinese: ?? zh? chá ("pearl tea").** The Chinese view emphasises the round pearl like shape.
- **French: Thé poudre à canon.** Direct translation of the English.
- **Arabic: ??? ??????? (shay al barud, "gunpowder tea").** Adopted from English/French via colonial trade.

How gunpowder is made

1. Tea leaves picked (typically more mature than premium green tea picks).
2. Briefly steamed or pan fired to halt oxidation (preserves the green colour).
3. Rolled into tight pellets, traditionally by hand, modernly by machine.
4. Dried.

The rolling step is what makes gunpowder distinctive. Tightly rolled leaves:

- Take less storage volume
- Minimise air exposure (slowing degradation)

- Release flavour gradually during brewing
- Yield multiple infusions from the same leaves

Where gunpowder is grown

Major regions:

- **Zhejiang Province, China.** The historical home; produces the bulk of high grade gunpowder.
- **Other Chinese provinces.** Various grades.
- **Taiwan.** Some specialty gunpowder style production.
- **Sri Lanka, Vietnam.** Smaller production.

The "Pinhead" or "Special Pinhead" grades from Zhejiang are the highest tier, smaller, tighter pellets indicating finer leaf material.

What it tastes like

Stronger and more mineral than typical Chinese green:

- Bold, substantial body
- Slightly toasty (Maillard reaction notes from the firing/rolling)
- Mineral undertones
- Mild astringency

The cup tolerates more aggressive brewing than delicate green tea, it's built for North African style preparation with sugar and mint.

The Moroccan connection

North Africa, especially Morocco, adopted gunpowder enthusiastically in the 18th-19th centuries via European colonial trade. Moroccan mint tea (atay bil na'na) became synonymous with gunpowder + spearmint + sugar. Today, Morocco imports more Chinese green tea per capita than almost any other country.

The flavour pairing works because gunpowder's strength stands up to the heavy sweetening and assertive mint that defines Moroccan preparation. Delicate green tea would disappear under the same treatment.

How to brew gunpowder

Western brewing

1. 1 tsp pellets per 200ml.
2. Water at 80-85°C, gunpowder tolerates slightly higher than premium sencha.
3. Steep 2-3 minutes. Pellets unfurl during brewing.
4. Drink black; sweeten only if desired.

Moroccan style mint tea

1. 1-2 heaped tsp gunpowder per 250ml.
2. Pour boiling water; quickly pour out (the "wash" infusion).
3. Add fresh mint and 2-3 sugar cubes.
4. Add fresh boiling water; steep 5 minutes.
5. Pour from height into glasses for aerated foam.

Gongfu brewing

Higher leaf to water ratio (5g per 100ml), multiple short infusions (15-30 seconds each). Yields 4-6 cups from the same leaves with progressively different character. More on gongfu brewing.

Multiple infusions

One of gunpowder's strengths. Quality pellets fully unfurl over the first few infusions, releasing different flavour compounds at each stage:

- **Infusion 1:** Bright, slightly grassy. Pellets begin to open.
- **Infusion 2:** Fuller body, more mineral. Pellets fully open.
- **Infusion 3:** Mellower, softer. Most of the catechins released.
- **Infusion 4-5:** Light, gentle finish.

Storage

Gunpowder is more storage stable than typical loose leaf green tea because the tight pellets minimise air exposure. 12-18 months in proper airtight storage. Best within 12 months opened.

traditional uses

Standard green tea profile, catechins (especially EGCG), L theanine, polyphenols. Modest, ordinary green tea benefits with regular consumption. More on green tea benefits.

Caffeine

30-40mg per 200ml cup. Slightly higher than premium Japanese sencha because gunpowder uses more mature leaves.

Buying

Available through specialist UK tea retailers, Asian groceries, and selected supermarkets.

FAQ

Why is it called gunpowder? The rolled green tea pellets resemble gunpowder grains.

What's "Pinhead Gunpowder"? Higher grade, smaller, tighter pellets. More refined cup, premium pricing.

Is gunpowder good for daily drinking? Yes, durable, multiple infusions, accessible price for the quality.

Best use case? Moroccan mint tea is the best known use. Gongfu brewing reveals premium grades.

How is it different from sencha? Different processing (rolled vs not), different leaf maturity, stronger cup. Both are green tea but distinctly different drinks.

Curator's note: gunpowder is the no nonsense workhorse of Chinese green tea. The Pinhead grade from Zhejiang is excellent for daily drinking; standard gunpowder is the affordable foundation of Moroccan mint tea. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Gunpowder, at a glance

Aspect	The read
What it is	Chinese green rolled into tight pellets that unfurl
The name	From the pellet shape; "zhu cha", pearl tea, in Chinese
Origin	Mainly Zhejiang; quality runs pinhead to commodity
Best use	Sturdy everyday green; the Moroccan mint base
Brew	Off the boil, short, with room to open; re-steeps

This is the production companion to the gunpowder green tea grades-and-uses guide. Buy a good one in the green tea range, compare a Moroccan mint, or browse the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Brew gunpowder the way you enjoy it, shelf advice aside. Curiosity is the only reliable guide.

Gunpowder reading

- Gunpowder green tea (grades & uses)
- Chinese green tea
- Green tea (the pillar)
- Peppermint tea

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